# SOME NORTHERN TRAILS

By

Norman Soars

What is folklore? How old or how oft-repeated does a sotry have to be before it can be regarded as a folk tale? Perhaps this depends partly on the historical background of the country from which it comes.

In most of Alberta, our history goes back little more than one hundred and fifty years, so that some of the stories of the early days of the railroads can almost be regarded as folklore. The story, for instance, of the lady on the E.D. & B.C. train that, on one celebrated occasion, took two weeks to reach Edmonton has been repeated often enough. When the lady told the conductor that she must get to the city, he replied that she should not have got on the train "in that condition". Her retort was that she hadn't!

The early road builders were very ambitios in their choice of names. The first railroad that ran only from Strathcona to Edmonton, over the low-level bridge was called the Edmonton, Yukon, and Pacific, and, while it is still in operation, it shows little sign of reaching either the Yukon or the Pacific.

The Edmonton, Dunvegan, and British Columbia Railway had done better, for, while it completely missed Dunvegan, it is still reaching out for the B. C. boundary from its terminus at Hines Creek. The naming of the E.D. & B.C. gave the real estate operators of that day an opportunity to subdivide and sell in town lots seven quarter-sections of land on the slopes of the Dunvegan Hill.

The oldest and the first trail to be mentioned in the North Country is the "Kinistino War Road" which is referred to by David Thompson, the North-West Company's cartographer. This trail was still shown on the township surveys made in the early part of the present century. It was used by the Crees of the south when they traveled by the Athabasca and Slave rivers, across Lesser Slave Lake to a point near Grouard, from whence their warpath ran across country to a crossing of the Smokey, near its junction with the Peace. This was apparently little more than a blazed foottrail and was never cleared for wheeled traffic, although for a century or more it was the only overland route into the Peace River country.

For nearly one hundred years after the first trading companies established their posts on the Peace, all freight was brought into the country by canoe and York boat by way of Fond du Lac and Lake Athabasca, but in 1884 the Hudson's Bay Company had a road cut from Grouard to Peace River Crossing.

This was the birth of the historic Grouard Trail which was traveled by all the pioneers up until thirty years ago, with the exception of those who found their way into the Grande Prairie country over the Edson Trail.*

The old grade of the Grouard Trail, down the Grouard Hill into the valley of the Peace, can still be traced, and the experience of driving down that grade in an old Model T Ford car can never be forgotten. It was in 1913 that the first Model T, owned by the late Mr. H. A. George, made that momentous trip.

After crossing the river at "The Crossing", as Peace River town is still called by the old timers, the trail changed its name. The crossing, incidentally, was first made by swimming the horses or oxen and later by a hand-operated ferry. Reaching the far bank, the Grouard Trail became the Dunvegan Trail and followed the river bank upstream for some twelve miles before climbing Brick's Hill to the plateau above.

At the foot of Brick's Hill** there is a creek that was especially convenient for the use of early mortorists. They used to stop to fill their radiators and balance an extra pail of water on the running board to replentish the radiator half way up the hill. The passengers would run (or walk) behind the car to provide extra power if needed. Halfway up the hill there was a level spot where the car was parked while the driver and passengers sat around waiting

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for the radiator to go off the boil before refilling it. Travel on the old trails, whether by ox-cart or Model T, was always an adventure.

With all the recent talk about the Alaska Highway, there has been little said about the Peace River-Yukon Road -- a road which started from Peace River and ended in the wilderness after 357 miles of heartbreaking work -- ended through lack of support when the B. C. Government failed to co-operate in its completion.

In 1905 a party of thirty-two Mounted Police arrived at Peace River Landing with orders to cut a wagon trail through to the Yukon. They crossed the river on a primitive ferry, constructed by Mr. H. A. George, the first ferry to operate on the Peace. With axes and saws their only equipment, and horses their only power, the men bridged torrents and cut trail for three years to reach the B.C.-Yukon telegraph line.

Another trail-cutting exploit that deserves a place in Northern history took place in December, 1925 by Louis Bourassa that celebrated mail carrier of the North. Louis had carried mail from Peace River to Fort Vermilion for many years, by dog team, by pack pony, and later with horses and sleighs. Before him his father, John Bourassa, had carried the mail for the Hudson's Bay Company by dog team from Fort Dunvegan to Fort Chipewyan, and Louis was brought up in the tradition that the mail must always go through. On

this particular trip Louis Bourassa was some 120 miles downstream from Peace River on his way to Fort Vermilion, when a sudden thaw started the ice moving. It was night but he managed to get his horses and sleighs up the cut-bank where he was faced with the task of dutting a road for sixty miles through heavy bush to join the Dunvegan Trail. With two companions he brought the heavily-laden sleighs and the precious mail through to the Fort. He was seven weeks on the road, but the mail got through. For this exploit, and for his years of service as mail carrier, Louis was awarded the medal of the Order of the British Empire at King George the Fifth's Silver Jubilee.

After his death Louis' son, another John Bourassa, continued to carry the mail to Fort Vermilion until the airplanes took it over and Johnny left to carry destruction over Germany as piolet of a Lancaster bomber in the Pathfinder Wing of the R.A.F.

That the King should recognize Johnny Bourassa's exploits by the award of the Distinguished Flying Cross seems only fitting, for the Bourassas have served as Pathfinders in Canada since 1688 when Francois Bourassa was engaged to trade into "les pays d'en haut" (Illinois) out of Montreal, and Rene Bourassa was a manager of "la Compagnie de la Baie".

When the entire Continent was hearing the story of the building of the Alaska Highway, how many people heard of those early trail blazers who, without benefit of bulldozers or government backing, carved their way through the wilderness to open up the hidden Empire of the North? The old timers are dying off and their exploits are in danger of being forgotten, but even while the airplane and the bulldozer are creating a new folklore of the Northland, the tales of its heroic past should not be lost to posterity.